

A GOOD DAY

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BY

OYD CABLE

OF "BETWEEN THE LINES," "ACTION FRONT,"
"DOING THEIR BIT," ETC.



NEW YORK

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

681 FIFTH AVENUE

Exquisite, Ernest Anderson's

A GOOD DAY

BY
BOYD CABLE *passed*

AUTHOR OF "BETWEEN THE LINES," "ACTION FRONT,"
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A GOOD DAY.

HALF an hour before there was a hint of dawn in the sky the flight was out with the machines lined up on the grass, the mechanics busy about them, the pilots giving preliminary tests and runs to their engines. There had been showers of rain during the night, welcome rain which had laid the dust on the roads and washed it off the hedges and trees, rain just sufficient to slake the thirst of the parched ground and grass, without bringing all the discomfort of mud and mire which as a rule comes instantly to mind when one speaks of "rain" at the front.

It was a summer morning, fresh, and cool, and clean, with the raindrops still gemming the grass and leaves, a delicious scent of moist earth in the balmy air, a happy chorus of chirping, twittering birds everywhere, a lark, impatient for the day, already in air and singing gloriously—a "great," a "gorgeous," a

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“perfect” morning, as the pilots told each other.

A serene Sabbath stillness, a gentle calm hung over the aerodrome until the machines were run out and the engines began to tune up. But even in their humming, thrumming, booming notes there was nothing harsh or discordant or greatly out of keeping with the air of peace and happiness. And neither, if one had not known what it was, would the long heavy rumble that beat down wind have wakened any but peaceful thoughts. It might have been the long lazy boom of the surf beating in on a sandy beach, the song of leaping waterfalls, the distant rumble of summer thunder . . . except perhaps for the quicker drum-like roll that rose swelling every now and then through it, the sharper, yet dull and flat, thudding bumps and thumps that to any understanding ear marked the sound for what it was—the roar of the guns.

Already the guns were hard at it—had been for days and nights past, in fact—would be harder at it than ever as the light grew on this summer morning, for this was the day set

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for the great battle, was within an hour or two of the moment marked for the attack to begin.

The squadron commander was out long before the time detailed for the flight to start. He spoke to some of the pilots, looked round, evidently missed someone, and was just beginning, "Where is——" when he caught sight of a figure in flying clothes hurrying out from the huts. The figure halted to speak to a pilot and the Major called impatiently, "Come along, boy. Waiting for you." "Right, sir," called the other and then laughingly to his companion, "Worst of having a brother for C.O. Always privileged to chase you."

"Flight Leader ought to be first, Sonny, not last," said the Major as the boy came up. "Sorry, Jim," said the boy, "I'm all ready," and ran on to his waiting machine.

One by one the pilots clambered aboard and settled themselves in their seats, and one after another the engines were started, sputtering and banging and misbehaving noisily at first in some cases, but quickly steadying,

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and, after a few grunts and throaty *whur rumps*, picking up their beat, droning out the deep note that rises tone by tone to the full long roaring song of perfect power.

The Major walked along the line, halted at each machine and spoke a word or two to each pilot. He stood a little longer at the end machine until the pilot eased his engine down and its roar dropped droning to a quiet “ticking over.”

“All right and all ready, Sonny?” said the Major.

“All correct, sir,” said Sonny laughingly and with a half joking salute. “Feel fine, Jim, and the old bus is in perfect trim.”

“Think the rain has gone,” said the Major. “It’s going to be a fine day, I fancy.”

“It’s just topping,” cried Sonny, wrinkling his nose and sniffing luxuriously. “Air’s as full of sweet scent as a hay meadow at home.”

“Flight got your orders all clear to start?”

Sonny nodded. “Yes, we’ll show you the usual star turn take-off all right. You watch us.”

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The Major glanced at his wrist watch and at the paling sky. "Almost time. Well, take care of yourself, Sonny." He put his hand up on the edge of the cockpit and Sonny slid his glove off, and gave an affectionate little squeeze to the fingers that came over the edge.

"I'll be all right, Jim boy. We're going to have a good day. Wish you were coming with us."

"Wish I were," said the Major. "Good luck," and he stepped back and walked out in front of the line of machines, halted, glanced at his watch and up at the sky again, and stood waiting.

The half dozen machines, too, stood waiting and motionless except for the answering quiver that ran through them to their engines' beat. Down from the line the throbbing roll of the gunfire rose louder and heavier, with a new, an ugly and sinister snarling note running through it. The flat thudding reports of the nearer Heavies came at quicker and closer intervals, the rumble of the fur-

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ther and smaller pieces ran up to the steady unbroken roar of drum-fire.

The wind was coming from the line and the machines were lined up facing into it, so that the pilots sat looking at the jumping, flickering lights which flamed up across the sky from the guns' discharge. Earlier, these flashes had blazed up in broad sheets of yellow and orange tinted light from the horizon to half way up the height of the dark sky, leaped and sank, leaped again and beat throbbing and pulsing wave on wave, or flickering and quivering jerkily for seconds on end, dying down, and immediately flaring up in wide sheet-lightning glows. Now, in the growing light the gun flashes showed more and more faintly, in sickly pallid flashes. There was no halt or pause between the jumping lights now; they trembled and flickered unceasingly, with every now and then a broader, brighter glare wiping out the lesser lights.

The pilots sat watching the battle lights, listening to the shaking battle thunder, and waiting the Squadron Commander's signal

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to go. The birds were chattering happily and noisily, and the lark climbed pouring out long shrill bursts of joyful song; somewhere over in the farmyard beside the drome hens cluck-clucked and a cock crowed shrilly; and from one of the workshops came the cheerful clink-link clink-link of hammers on an anvil.

It was all very happy and peaceful—except for the jumping gun-flashes and rolling gunfire, life was very sweet and pleasant—unless one thought of life over there in the trenches, and what the next hour or two would bring. Everyone knew there was “dirty work” ahead. It was the first really big “show” the Squadron had been in; they had been in plenty of the ordinary O. P. S. (Offensive Patrols) and air scraps, but this was the real big thing, a great battle on the ground, and a planned attack on the grand scale in the air which was to sweep the sky of Huns . . . and the gunfire was still growing . . . and the lark up there was bursting his throat to tell them what a pleasant place the world was on this summer morning, with the raindrops

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fresh on the grass and the breeze cool in the trees.

Nearly time! The flight leader ran his engine up again, its humming drone rising to a full deep-chested roar. The other pilots followed suit, engine after engine picking up the chorus and filling the air with deafening and yet harmonious sound. A man stood just clear of the wing-tips to either side of each machine, holding a cord fast to the wood blocks chocked under the wheels. Another man or two clung to each tail holding it down against the pull of the propeller, their sleeves, jacket tails, trousers legs fluttering wildly in the gales which poured aft from the whirling screws and sent twigs and leaves and dust flying and dancing back in a rushing stream. So the pilots sat for a minute, their faces intent and earnest, listening to the hum and beat of their engines and note of their propellers' roar, watching the flight leader's movements out of the tail of their eyes. He eased his engine down. And promptly every other engine eased. He waved his hand to right and left, and the waiting men jerked

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the chocks clear of his wheels. And five other hands waved and five other pairs of chocks jerked clear. He moved forward, swung to the right with a man to each wing-tip to help swing him, and rolled steadily out into the open. And five other machines moved forward, swung right, and followed in line astern of him. He wheeled to the left, moved more quickly, opened his engine up, ran forward at gathering speed. Moving slowly his machine had looked like a lumbering big fat beetle. Skimming rapidly across the grass with its nose down and its tail up, it changed to an excited hen racing with outstretched head and spread wings. Then—a lift—an upward swoop and rush—and she was . . . a swallow, an eagle, a soaring gull—any of these you like, as symbols of speed and power and grace, but best symbol of all perhaps, just herself, for what she was—a clean-built, stream-lined, two-hundred horse, fast, fighting-scout aeroplane.

The Squadron Commander stood watching the take-off of the flight with a thrill of pride, and truly it was a sight to gladden the heart

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of any enthusiast. As the flight leader's machine tucked up her tail and raced to pick up speed, the second machine had followed her round her curve, steadied, and began to move forward gathering way in her very wheel-tracks. As the leader zoomed up and away, the second machine was picking up her skirts and making her starting rush, and the third machine was steadying round the turn to follow. As the second left the ground, the third began to make her run, and the fourth was round the turn and ready to start hers. So they followed, machine by machine, evenly spaced in distance apart, running each other's tracks down, leaping off within yards of the same point, each following the other into the air as if they were tied on lengths of a string. It was a perfect exhibition of flight leadership—and following. One turn round the drome they made,—and the flight was in perfect formation and sailing off to the east, climbing as it went. The commander stood and watched them gain their height in one more wide sweeping turn and head due east, then moved towards the huts.

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The hammers were still beating out their cheery clink-link, the birds chirping and twittering. The lark, silenced or driven from the sky by these strange monster invaders, took up his song again and shrilled out to all the world that it was a joy to live on such a day of summer—of summer—of summer.

And the guns roared on in sullen rolling thunder.

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The last red glow of sunset was fading out of the square of sky seen through the open Squadron office window. The Major sat in his own place at the centre of the table, and his Colonel, with the dust of motor travel still thick on his cap and coat, sat by the empty fire-place listening and saying nothing. A young lad, with leather coat thrown open and leather helmet pushed back on his head, stood by the table and spoke rapidly and eagerly. He was one of the patrol that had left at dawn, had made a forced landing, had only just reached the drome, and had come straight to the office to report and tell his tale.

“I have the combat report, of course,” said

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the Major, "you might read it first—and I've some other details; but I'd like to know anything further you can tell."

The lad read the report, a bare dozen lines, of which two and a half told the full tale of a brave man's death—"as he went down out of control he signalled for us to break off the flight and return, and then for the deputy to take command. He was seen to crash."

"That's true, sir," said the lad, "but d'you know—d'you see what it—all it meant? We'd been scrappin' half an hour. We were on our last rounds of ammunition and our last pints of petrol . . . against seventeen Huns, and we'd crashed four and put three down out of control . . . they were beat, and we knew it, and meant to chase 'em off."

He had been speaking quickly, almost incoherently, but now he steadied himself and spoke more carefully.

"Then *he* saw their reinforcements comin' up, one lot from north, t'other from south. They'd have cut us off. We were too busy scrappin' to watch. They had us cold, with us on our last rounds and nearly out of petrol.

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But *he* saw them. He was shot down then—I dunno whether it was before or after he saw them; but he was goin' down right out of control—dead-leafing, then a spin, then leafing again. And he signalled——” The boy gulped, caught and steadied his voice again and went on quietly. “You know; there’s half a dozen coloured lights stuck in the dash-board in front of him—and his Verey pistol in the rack beside him. He picked out the proper coloured light—goin’ down helplessly out of control—and took his pistol out of the rack . . . and loaded it . . . and put it over the side and fired his signal, ‘Get back to the drome—return home,’ whatever it is exactly—we all knew it meant to break off the scrap and clear out, anyway. But he wasn’t done yet. He picked another light—the proper coloured light again . . . and still knowin’ he’d crash in the next few seconds . . . and loaded and fired, ‘I am out of action; deputy flight leader will carry on . . .’ Then, he crashed . . .”

The boy gulped again and stopped, and for

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a space there was dead silence in the little office.

“Thank you,” said the squadron commander at last, very quietly, “I won’t ask you for more now.”

The boy saluted and turned, but the Major spoke again. “There’s a message here I’ve just had. You might like to read it.”

The pilot took it and read a message of congratulations and thanks from headquarters on the work of the air services that day, saying how the Huns had been driven out of the air, how so many of them had been crashed, so many driven down out of control, with slight losses of so many machines to us. “On all the fronts engaged,” the message finished, “the Squadrons have done well, and the corps has had a good day.”

“A good day,” said the boy bitterly and spat a gust of oaths. “I—pardon, sir,” he said, catching the Major’s eye and the Colonel’s quick glance, “but—Sonny was my pal; I was his chum, the best chum he had——” He checked himself again, and after a pause, “No, sir,” he said, “I beg your par-

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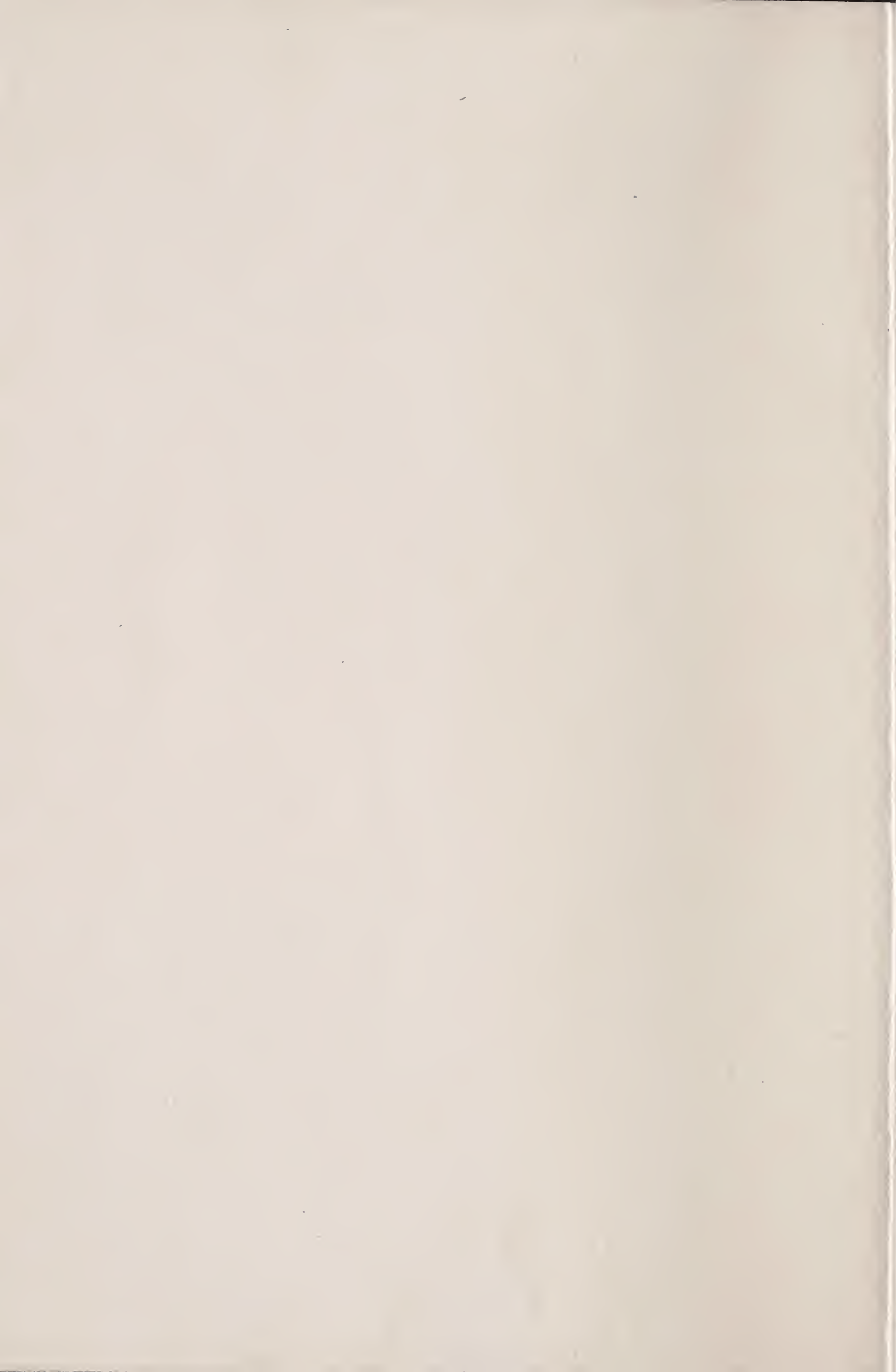
don. *You* were always that to Sonny.” He saluted again, very gravely and exactly, turned and went.

The Colonel rose. “It’s true, too,” said the Major, “I was; and he was the dearest chum to me. I fathered him since he was ten, when our Pater died. I taught him to fly—took him up dual myself, and I remember he was quick as a monkey in learning. I watched his first solo, with my heart in my mouth; and I had ten times the pride he had himself when he put his first wings up. And now . . . he’s gone.”

“He saved his flight,” said the Colonel softly. “You heard. It’s him and his like that make the Corps what it is. They show the way; and the others carry on. They go down, but——” he tapped his finger slowly on the message lying on the table, “but the corps . . . the corps ‘has had A Good Day.’ ”

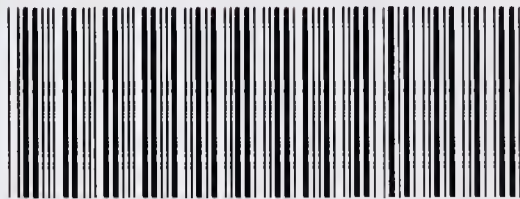








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